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ABSTRACT

Blacks are said to be often called upon to serve in difficult administrative positions located in school districts with financial difficulties where personnel and/or students are in revolt, where discipline is non-existent, where academic achievement levels are low, and where the community is divided. Major problems that arise when examining the urban school administrator from a black perspective are: the brief tenure of superintendents and other administrators, the urban school administration's reluctance to change, the lack of black people serving on school boards, and the lack of faith in education. Among the challenges and needs of urban school administrators listed are: (1) quality of education to enable all students to meet and deal with society; (2) a redirection of the school's focus from tax burdens to useful tools for the populace; (3) a provision of quality education for all students; (4) to instill in students interest in education; (5) to issue self-challenges; (6) to eliminate segregation; and, (7) to recognize that the present educational efforts are dysfunctional. Issues such as the future of the predominantly black urban center, black education in the North, urban school problems as compared with rural or community systems, federal financing, and revamping of the school curricula are discussed. (Author/AM)

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THE URBAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR
---A BLACK PERSPECTIVE

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> To have maintained a fervent interest in education and a belief in the rewards of learning required a major act of faith. Black people in America have been nothing if not idealists and devotees of the American dream. It is a source of wonder where such unending faith had its origins.[1]

Looking at the urban school administrator from any perspective requires an exercise in mental gymnastics. The modern day administrators have been moving in and out of positions at such a rapid rate that difficulties have arisen in merely finding these people much less discussing with them the problems encountered by them in the pursuit of their jobs. To examine the urban school administrator from a Black perspective requires that both the examiner and the examinee be of sound mind and body, be physically fit, super intelligent, possess both pragmatic and conservative views, be politically aware and disinterested in expressing views polemical in nature. It is also desirable that the administrators possess the craftiness to mask or unmask their intelligence when the occasion demands it--- in addition to being warm, cold, out-going, reserved, calm, and vociferous as the circumstances dictate.

Black school administrators are in trouble wherever they are, however, urban areas usually provide the most difficult circumstances for administrative achievement.

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[1] William Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968).

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Blacks must be able to "walk on water" literally. Blacks are called upon often to serve in difficult administrative positions located in school districts with financial difficulties where personnel and/or students are in revolt, where discipline is non-existent, where academic achievement levels are low, and where the community is divided. Who but a miracle worker could be expected to enter into such an atmosphere and bring order out of chaos. This is the situation which more often than not confronts Black administrators. Is there any wonder that the tenure of Black administrators is of usually short duration?

Many Blacks are not accustomed to having Black administrators in their schools and, consequently, are not adjusted to the reality of what the results could be. The pervading perception is that Black administrators should make special concessions to Black students when decisions are made regarding student performance. This is understandable when one is familiar with the backgrounds and history of Black people. Blacks have had few people in positions of power who also could serve as their advocates. I agree with the above premise up to a point, but, at the same time, I feel that quality work should be expected of students and be demanded by all those responsible for student achievement. To ask less would be grossly unfair to the students who are seeking the opportunities that education might bring.

The problem becomes one of bringing all factions together, arriving at a consensus on goals and objectives, and following through. Unfortunately, many Black administrators spend so much time responding to crises that they are unable to direct their energies to the resolution of critical problems.

In defining urban, we attach connotations which immediately project our attention to slums, ghetto situations, poverty-pockets, and people in despair who not only have given up on dreams once nurtured, but also have despaired of drawing on hope, encouragement, and motivation that can be passed on to future generations.

Yet, we know that regardless of race, ethnicity or economic background, children are our most priceless possessions.

In examining the urban school administrator from a Black perspective, problems are multiple and overwhelming to the untrained, inexperienced neophyte. Whatever the white school administrator encounters becomes astronomical when one is Black. Urban school problems are here to stay because our society is being rapidly transformed into an urban one. Education is not the only affected area---economics, social and political influences are all reflecting this change. Naturally, these changes are bringing problems in finance, labor negotiations and community crises; all making demands upon urban educational administrators. As previously mentioned, the tenure of superintendents and other administrators in urban areas is brief. One seldom dies on the job. It appears that the swiftest route to retirement is through the superintendency of an urban school system.

Another major problem of urban school administration is its reluctance to change. Not only reluctant to change the educational program, reluctance in looking at a wholly new way of dealing with curriculum, course content, human relations and personnel. Personnel is the nerve center from which educational concepts emanate.

Not nearly enough serious Black people are serving on our school boards. And, consequently, when a serious attempt is made by a Black school administrator to alter the pattern of cumulative deficit, there is no support from the governing board and too little support from the community. (Washington, D.C., is a case in point.) Boards of education, community councils, and state and federal boards have not been willing to deal with aggressive Black administrators. Black administrators are few and far between but their numbers are growing. They are, presently, a breed unto themselves and become objects of curiosity long before they are taken seriously. Once they are taken seriously, they become "threats" to the established order.

Sometimes it appears that urban schools are designed to serve the immediate economic ends of those in power. The same programs that have served to launch white children into college, provide "wholesome busy work" for Black students until they reach either "push out" or "drop out" age. To maintain a fervent interest in education and a belief in the rewards of learning requires a major act of faith. This faith is not being instilled in the minds of Black youth. This lack of faith in education is reflected through hostility toward school, teachers, boards of education, and administrators.

Challenges presented to Black school administrators should not differ from those faced by white administrators, although they do. Basic challenges require an ability to look at alternative positions, regardless of the source, and make rational decisions based on facts tempered with common sense. Basically, good judgment is required of all administrators who are accountable to the people. Administrators need to be aware of the forces that are bringing forth these changing needs and challenges. The challenges and needs of urban school administrators, as I see them from my position as a Black superintendent, are: (1) quality education that will enable all students to meet and deal with society in fulfilling their innate abilities; (2) redirection of the school's focus in order that they become useful tools for the populace rather than simply tax burdens; (3) provide quality education for all students regardless of race, ethnic origin, or economic status; (4) instill in students an interest in education not only for what the end results can do towards improving the quality of their living but for what they will be able to do for their fellowman; (5) to constantly issue self challenges; (6) to improve oneself; (7) to share the same affection and protectiveness for urban schools (which too frequently are places of terror, unrest and anxiety); (8) to be able to function sanely and wisely in the face of animosity, (9) to know and recognize, but not accept,

that his or her area of function is severely limited by blackness; (10) to make the American creed implementable and equally applicable to all by working to insure that it is the Creed of progress, liberty, equality and humanitarianism; (11) work towards eliminating the feeling of inferiority and a sense of hopelessness prevalent among lower-socioeconomic groups; (12) to enhance the quality of and potential for creative leadership; (13) to apply constructive new thinking to urban educational problems (The old ones did not work.); (14) put forth effort to bring about effective social changes within the schools as necessitated by our changing society; (15) bring the schools into line with modern day demands and needs; (16) eliminate segregation---social class as well as racial; and (17) recognize that the present educational efforts are dysfunctional.[2]

The future of the predominantly Black urban center is not clear. Being in a transitory position is not a pleasant place to be whatever the administrative position. The Black urban community has inherited problems created by a regressive economy---employment possibilities are dwindling instead of increasing; housing conditions are worsening in spite of the half-hearted attempts by HEW; health care is becoming a battle; and, needless to say, all ills seep through the door of education. However, I do not suffer from all gloom and despair. I happen to believe that there are remedies for the ills in urban education and that the cures must emanate from those persons in power. It is imperative that leadership come from those who are intellectually able to provide it. Leadership must show foresight and insight. In order to survive:

> We'll have to go at least to the scale equivalent with our effort in Vietnam . . . in commitment. Newark, Detroit, Jersey City and

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[2] M.R. Shed, Urban Education, A National Disaster, Education Yearbook, 1972-73 (New York: MacMillan & Free Press, 1972).

> all other ghettoed and declining cities of this country should be rebuilt in the next ten to fifteen years on a production schedule using the resources of the great construction and finance companies. They must be rebuilt by critical path methods which incorporate the demands of adequate relocation. Whatever we do must be done tangibly and by deadline so that we do not have urban renewal promises that lay and end up with benefit to only one sector of the community.[3]

The urban administrator's job is fantastic. He must attempt to correct the ills and mistakes of society in a contractual period of time that have taken ages to compile. In order to be effective, Blacks as well as whites must come out of isolation, stop making the safe and popular decisions and take some definite stands on what they feel are good and rational ideas. We must try to do more than what is expected of us, for we cannot afford to do less. Unless we can withstand the "fire," cope with apathy, deal with and circumvent financial obstacles, we should give up the ship in favor of someone who is a risk-taker, an experimenter, and a mistake-maker. There should be no fear connected with making mistakes---if one does nothing then surely no mistakes will be made. Of course, one will be doing his homework backing up decisions with rational thought, research, and the exchange of ideas. The process of making a decision is often more important than the decision itself.

It is time that Black school administrators realize that education is a continuous search that only begins in the schools. We are carrying the burdens and ills of society in a compact package within our school walls. The burdens are of a social and economic nature. In a relatively short span of time, administrators

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[3]Arnold Rose, The Negro in America, (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 280.

are expected to make the necessary corrections and administer the proper medicine in prescribed doses so as to deliver to society a mentally and physically healthy individual prepared to cope with society's demands and requirements. This is a herculean task that staggers the imagination, but it can be done.

I wish to share with you a letter written in 1969 by a principal in New York City to Freedomways magazine. The writer was, even at that time, expressing anger, dissatisfaction and deep concern for students:

> The crucial question of quality education for Black and Puerto Rican children---indeed for all youngsters in our country who suffer in one form or another from the basic inequities of American capitalism---is increasingly a topic of concern and anxiety among educators . . . . The problem becomes: How can the schools hope to overcome or compensate for the debilitating effects stemming from an exceedingly pathogenic socio-economic system? We, the educators, are charged with the public responsibility of remediating, compensating for the continuous and pervasive hostility, prejudice discrimination, privation and insensitively perpetuated upon Black and Puerto Rican youngsters and their parents daily.
>
> Moreover, we are mandated by state constitutions, local statutes and customs to "explain" to these exploited people that the schools have been established to help them to help themselves. The tragic and most chilling aspect of this situation has been the quiet and tacit acceptance by educators, white and black, that the conditions they see in the schools are inevitable.

> For educators, then, the task becomes vividly clear; are we to perpetuate the existing social arrangements or are we to facilitate changing the existing arrangements?
>
> The "changing community" is today a dynamic force from which Black and Puerto Rican Americans, who have traditionally been exploited and denied their rights, will confront the exploiters and their apologists. Accordingly, the schools and educators will be involved directly in this struggle. Educators can only be relevant to the "changing community" when they identify the community's struggle as their own. We can no longer serve our constituents' platitudes about the "American Dream,"---we must now engage all our efforts and skills in helping each and every individual in our community to achieve his basic American rights---i.e., liberty and equality of opportunity.[4]

Black education in the North, when compared to urban education, seems to be one and the same if there is a desire to be both pragmatic and honest. The large numbers of Black people who migrated to the North seeking a better way of life, and a smaller number of whites, found themselves sharing the same community. Economics played a major role in determining where both Blacks and whites settled upon arriving in the North or other large cities throughout the country, while racial restrictions played a role for Blacks in determining ethnic distribution of the schools. The movement towards a rising educational expectation of the Black population is of tremendous importance in working with urban educational problems.[5]

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[4] Ronald Evans, "On the Education of Our Children" Freedomways, IX (Winter 1969), 76.

[5] Melvin Steinfield, "Revamping the Curriculum," Racism and Discrimination in American History (New York: Glencoe Press, 1970) p. 336.

In comparing urban school problems with rural or community systems, we note a striking similarity that is difficult to ignore: (a) Actual planned development of urban school systems never was initiated. (b) Rural and small community systems also just happened, with convenience and access as major considerations. (c) Urban school administrators are faced with how much, not what sort of, education to plan for students. (d) Rural and small school system administrators are concerned with type, quality and public appeal.

Problems relative to Black perspectives are clearly visible to the persons responsible for finding workable solutions. A vital area confronting Black administrators is staffing. Many competent teachers will refuse to work in an urban school and some refuse to work for a Black administrator.

Vital to urban schools are teachers who are competent and dedicated. It is difficult to find both qualities to a large degree in an urban system. Teachers, normally, will teach in an urban situation for a short time. This provides them with a variety of experiences that serves them well upon their departure. It also creates a high teacher turnover rate and necessitates continuous recruitment.

In Chicago and New York City, for instance, ninety per cent of the teachers in the schools are either new (and waiting to get to the suburbs), problem teachers who have been shunted from one place to another waiting on retirement, or probationary teachers who are performing a holding tactic while looking around for greener pastures or at least more lucrative ones.

Improved federal financing coupled with state subsidies must be enacted immediately as a preventive as well as a remedial measure if urban schools are to be saved financially. Ideally, the federal government should supply a basic subsidy per pupil nationwide.

Education must allow the urban child to function in the American culture at large. Black educators and administrators should have no difficulty with this concept because of the peculiar background of Black people. We are a people who historically have been uprooted, relocated both willingly and unwillingly, throughout our past. We have trekked the deserts of the East, the mountain ranges of the Kilimanjaros, the wilds of Africa, and the jungles of America's city streets and slums. Through circumstance, we have been a protesting and mobile people. We want to be changeable in a positive way, with some recourse in selecting and planning our own lifestyles.

Revamping the curricula of any school system is difficult. It becomes monumental when curricular changes are combined with revamping an entire district whose attitudes are hostile, not especially against educators, but education. Upon accepting an urban position, the urban school administrator must always face the fact that the curriculum is a problem. The demands for more Black studies, programs, and projects indicated the emergence of a new self-concept and self-image. The urban administrator must be prepared to deal with this need, for his choices are limited. Gordon Allport declares:

> A man who lacks historical identity is severely handicapped. A man who cannot relate his own experiences to a past in which the frailities and strengths, the follies and wisdoms are in part his own is bereft of perspective. To the disgrace of the U.S., past and present, the Afro-American was the only individual who was denied his history.[6]

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[6]Gordon W. Allport, "Fear and Anxiety," Another View: To Be Black in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Javanovich, 1970), p. 204.

As previously stated, crime and disease are a reflection of the urban environment along with miseducation and under-education. The National Urban League, organized by George Edmund Haynes in 1911, was conceived because of Mr. Haynes' interest in the social conditions of the urban Black. Today with the organization still existing and functioning, urban problems remain the same. The same thrust is on the schools as was proposed by the Urban League and is a commitment which needs to be taken on by Black and white administrators alike.

A difference noted when urban administrative problems are being tackled is that a white administrator can operate openly and freely if desired whereas the Black administrator is forced to wear a mask. The Black administrator's ideas and concepts are expected to be cloaked in mystery, manipulated, and fitted into a mold that has been designed by the white man from the beginning. This is degrading, to say the least, and it also makes it impossible for the Black administrator to conceive, implement, and follow through on original ideas which most likely are far superior to those chosen for the Black administrator.

Connected with the Black administrator by those in administrative positions, and others, are the elusive myths that must be fought continuously. The supposition is that a white can be effective while a Black cannot, even though comparable in qualification. People tend to believe that which they want to believe. The myth that Black administrators do not have the expertise to deal with problems found in urban areas can be exploded by pointing to Black superintendents and other administrators functioning successfully in urban areas. There is a myth that white teachers and other personnel would not work for Black administrators. The truth is that when economics is pitted against color, economics wins. The myth exists that Black administrators are unable to stand up under pressure because Blacks are an emotional, excitable people. Blacks have experienced a lifetime of training in the field of

stress and strain, not knowing (frequently) that there was another way of feeling or that anxiety is not supposed to be a continuous part of the human makeup. The myth persists that Black folk are attempting to "take over" and we are looked upon as threats to the job security of others when, in reality, all we are attempting to do is to insure a place for Blacks who are equally competent. Chronic anxiety puts us on the alert from a white perspective and whites on the alert from a Black perspective. This chronic anxiety predisposes whites to see all sorts of stimuli as menacing.

This country demands that every race measure itself by the American standard. Since the American standard is that under which we must all sink or swim, the reasonableness of the idea is to insure that the same means of reaching that standard is available, equally, to all. We, as educators, particularly Black educators, have a special responsibility. We must assume responsibility for enlightening those who are already involved in the process by creating a thirst for the knowledge, and plant a seed of curiosity in those who are skeptical and wary of committing themselves to a set of goals that never before have been realized. With white educators (working in any area) the greatest problem is that of choosing a subject field in which they will be most happy. Their choices are which and when---not whether and will. We cannot subscribe to Booker T. Washington's advocacy of adjustment and submission which accepts the alleged inferiority of Blacks. He asked that Black people, in order to survive, give up political power, civil rights, and higher education of Black youth, emphasizing instead industrial education, material goods and conciliation of the South. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address made it very clear that his was an effort at peace at any price, which the alert Black administrator---educator of today cannot buy. W. E. Du Bois, on the other hand, stated that:

> The Negro race like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money, the object of man training, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools---intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it---this is the curriculum of that higher education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand, and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life.[7]

We all know who is guiding the education of today's youth. And, we all know that in order to become more effective, competent Black administrators must be placed in positions where they can serve as models for youth on the brink---waiting to be led, toppled or pushed. Who can better deal with modern problems of urban education than those who have come up through the "school of hard knocks"? In pursuing educational goals, the urban school educator must be alert to the

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[7]W.E. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," What Country Have I? (New York: St. Martin Press, 1970), p. 103.

circumventions gaining widespread popularity, such as, vocationalizing urban education to the point of assembly line production. It does keep students off the streets, keep them busy with their hands. But, does vocationalizing prepare youth for the assumption of leadership positions that require preparation in logic, public relations and business? Our most talented youth must be trained in colleges and universities. I admit freely that all men cannot go to college nor should all men be expected to go; but some men must, and we as Black educators must see to it that Black folk are among those who do go. Du Bois states:

> A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will suffice, not even trade and industrial schools---every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have for the talented few, centers of training where men are not so mystified and befuddled by the hard and necessary toil of earning a living, as to have no aims higher than their bellies and no God greater than God.[8]

Reverend Joseph H. Jackson, in an address before the National Baptist Convention in Detroit, set some guidelines which Black folk need to consider seriously. He touched on the issues of remaining in the mainstream of American democracy, the value of remaining logical and legal during our freedom struggle, and the use of the voting booth as one way of fighting our battle. But, he went further and into depth on the training of future leaders. He stated emphatically that:

> Negroes must still make their own leaders . . . . Negroes must not forget that we have many fields in which leaders are necessary

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[8] Ibid.

> and important, and we should accept and follow the leaders in their respective field; that is, when they are right . . . . We have political leaders, civil rights leaders, religious leaders business leaders, athletes, comedians, actors, and the whole range. We also have educators who are making contributions in the field of thought and mental growth. Let us honor, follow, and respect them. Let us not discourage Negro educators by advocating directly or indirectly that they are by nature inferior to educators in other racial groups. . . . We as a race must see to it that each man serves in his field and we must not allow the white community to pick our leaders or tell us whom we should follow. Today, I call for another type of direct action---which is oriented towards the Negroes' ability, talent, genius, and capacity. . . . We must not be guilty of possessing the minds and actions of a blind Samson who pulled a building down upon himself as well as his enemies.[9]

What we are trying to do is to change the minds of those folk in power positions who are making decisions daily affecting millions of Black Americans---including thousands of students and educators struggling with the inadequacies of urban education. I am certain that not one of us will forget that when we attempt to change certain acquired attitudes and habits, we are seeking to change that which is vital in human nature; which means we must be talented enough to recondition emotions and concepts that have been traditional since birth, for many.

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[9]Joseph H. Jackson "Annual Address of President Joseph H. Jackson," National Baptist Convention, Detroit, Michigan, 1964 (unpublished manuscript).

We must insure that the democratic dream is not killed by a lack of competent Black people striving to keep it alive. The problems that exist within our society, educationally as well as economically, need immediate attention in order to curtail the threat to our way of life and life styles. One hangup in the democratic process is that educators generally accept intellectually and verbally democratic deals but lack the emotional participation. The primary goal of education in a free society should be the development of an inquiring mind. We must begin to ask questions and fully realize that some thought must be given to the question before it is asked.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we must admit that superintendents of today must be "tough", able to take criticism, and aware of the conflict which surrounds the office. In addition, today's superintendent must be sensitive, perceptive, and humanistic. Thankfully, they are not expected to be specialists in all areas. Although a broad background is desirable, today's superintendents can hire competent staffs to assist with the day-to-day problems. Many new careers in administration are opening up as administrations become more specialized. Not knowing what is happening at the teacher and minor administrative level is a problem that needs attention. The superintendent's position, one of the most important in the system, is basically a lonely one. In many situations the superintendent really has few people with whom he can, or dares, talk. This means that careful consideration must be made of those people on whom the superintendent will be depending for assistance, lest trouble brew from within as well as without.

Educational problems in large urban systems must be analyzed and studied more intensely with input by those whose education is affected. We need to know,

neighborhood by neighborhood, when a social situation is deteriorating, so that the American know-how can be immediately brought into full play to do what we feel is necessary by whatever means available for ultimate completion. Disunity must be eliminated, whether it be between Blacks or between Blacks and whites. It is a deadly poison that keeps divisions continuous, which, in turn prevents forward progress on either side. Black school administrators are expected to play a vital role in education for decades to come.

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